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Neglected Struggle

A little-publicized area of U.S.-Soviet rivalry is student exchange. There is evidence that the Soviets are winning the battle for the minds of future leaders of the Third World.

Even the traditionally hardware-oriented Pentagon recognizes the importance of bringing foreign students to the United States for education. The most recent military posture statement by the Joint Chiefs of Staff declares that the funding of foreign students at U.S. military schools is "possibly the most cost-effective of all U.S. security assistance programs in many regions of the world."

One area of particular concern is Central America and the Caribbean. A landmark report prepared for the National Security Council concludes that the Soviet Union has taken a "most disturbing" lead in the numbers of students it trains from that region.

The study was done by an inter-agency team from the CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency, Joint Chiefs and Commerce Department. My associate, Dale Van Atta, has obtained a copy of the group's findings which are classified "Secret."

"In the Third World," the report says, "the Soviets have placed heavy emphasis on academic exchanges as an instrument of policy." Meanwhile, it adds, the United States is missing an important opportunity by failing to expose "upcoming young foreign leaders during the formative years of their careers . . . to American ideas, political philosophies and social patterns."

Such exposure could "stimulate a lifelong interest in and understanding of the United States," the report notes, adding: "Most important, such an exposure to our society also can create an orientation to Americans, their institutions and their technology once the foreign students have returned home to pursue their careers in their own countries."

The secret study estimates Soviet expenditures on foreign scholarships worldwide at \$1 billion over the last 25 years. Of the 68,000 students trained in the Soviet Union, only about 2,600 were from the Caribbean-Central American region.

But that relatively small number is deceptive, the report warns: Soviet programs in the area have been growing consistently. By the end of 1979, some 1,100 working-class students from the region were studying in the Soviet Union—most of them at Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow.

In addition, 800 Latin American students were studying elsewhere in the Soviet bloc. The report cited a "vigorous" exchange program between East Germany and the three Caribbean basin countries of Nicaragua, Grenada and Guyana.

Furthermore, the report adds, "Cuba seems to have some 2,000-3,000 Caribbean and Central American students enrolled in technical and academic programs, and 1,200 secondary students from Nicaragua studying on the Isle of Youth (formerly the Isle of Pines)."

The interagency group found it next to impossible to arrive at comparable figures for U.S. programs. Though immigration records showed 20,613 students from the Caribbean Basin in this country in 1979, the report notes that "a large number of these visitors were not enrolled in real training programs, and may not have been studying at all."

After bringing the figures for all U.S. government and private exchange programs down to reality, the study concluded: "In terms of gross numbers, [U.S. programs] provide only about two-thirds of the places available in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe, and when the large Cuban effort is added, the comparison becomes overwhelmingly disproportionate."